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CONSTANT PERMEKE

paintings & drawings

The Arts Council: 1957

Foreword

EXPRESSIONISM is essentially an attitude of mind characteristic of the Northern temperament which thrives on social stress and spiritual upheaval. It is little wonder that it has pervaded the art of the present age. If Münch and van Gogh were the leading figures in the first modern phase of expressionism, Permeke must certainly be counted as one of the greatest figures in the second wave which appeared about 1905 with the creation of the *Brücke* group in Germany. One of the founders of Flemish expressionism, he puts us in his debt by sparing us the usual display of suffering and despair and conveying rather a sense of immense physical gusto and a rich plebeian vitality which is reflected in his elemental vision of man and the earthy colours and heavy tones of his painting. His weightiness is entirely in accord with the slow movement of the countryside and its peasantry.

The exhibition has been organized by the Ministère de l'Instruction Publique of Belgium in furtherance of the aims of the Anglo-Belgian Cultural Convention. We are most grateful to all the private collectors and museums who have kindly lent pictures; to M. van Lerberghe, Counsellor at the Ministry, who has selected the pictures and written the catalogue; and to Mlle Tenzer, first secretary at the Belgian Embassy in London, from whom we have had much practical assistance. As always, we are deeply indebted to the Trustees and Director of the Tate Gallery for placing their galleries at our disposal.

PHILIP JAMES

Introduction

FOR THOSE who are unfamiliar with the recent developments in Belgian art a major exhibition of paintings and drawings by Constant Permeke, one of the most important of her twentieth-century artists, needs an introduction.

Paul Haesaerts has described him well: 'Thick-set, he has a heavy gait and rounded shoulders. His head is deeply sunk, his complexion ruddy with fair and bushy eyebrows and a prominent lip, half-way between a pout and a mocking smile. His powerful and hairy hands with their fingers, "square tipped and stubby" as Karel van de Woestijne has described them, are yet finely sensitive in their gestures. At times he laughs noisily or is moody and dissatisfied, at other times he is deeply moved. He has suffered bitter hardship and lived in hovels, but "in spite of it all it did not kill us". Whether dressed in a fisherman's sweater or in a tailored suit he is clearly of the people, with his small eyes, watchful, sly and twinkling. There is no doubt about his hearty good nature and there is laughter with his mockery.'

This man, in spite of his rough exterior, was deeply sensitive at heart and could not live happily in the artificial society of a town. By temperament and education he preferred the country, and contact with peasants and fishermen. He lived first at Laethem-St. Martin, a small village near Ghent, where there was a colony of artists, then at Ostende, and then at Jabbeke, and when in England he was happier in Devonshire than in London.

As soon as he had left the Academy he was attracted to Laethem-St. Martin, where he lived for several years before the first World War. There he found the symbolist painters, Van de Woestijne and De Saedeleer, both of whom were to spend the war years in England, and there also was the cradle of Belgian expressionism. He quickly abandoned the post-impressionism taught at the Academy and the picture *Maternity* (No. 1), now in the Boymans Museum, discloses clearly the kind of painter he was to be to the end of his life. Here the various characteristics of his art were becoming established; his drawing was admirable, he had found the subjects and the atmosphere that suited him. The first steps towards his expressionist style had been made.

War brought this life to an end. He was mobilized and took part in the first battles, but, seriously wounded at Antwerp, he was evacuated to England. There his recovery was slow and for nearly two years he did not paint. He did not start to work again until 1916. He settled down with his family in Devonshire, where after one or two false starts his style crystallized. While some of his Laethem friends renewed contact with European painting in Amsterdam, where they spent the war years, Permeke was isolated at Chardstock. *The Stranger* (No. 2) expresses beautifully both

the feeling of exile of which he was unable to rid himself and his fervent, almost religious, gratitude for the hospitality he enjoyed.

On his return to Belgium he settled down again at Ostende, where the harbour and the life of its fishermen had always attracted him. In 1925 he moved to Jabbeke, a little village a few kilometres from Ostende. He built his own house, which has now become the Permeke Museum, and died there in 1952 at the age of 66. He rarely travelled and his life was thus spent, far from any centre of artistic or intellectual activity, among the simple people he loved. He joined in their sports, archery and bowls. This life explains the choice of his subjects and the spirit of his work.

Constant Permeke, as his contemporaries Gustave de Smet and Jean Brusselmans, can only be linked to the expressionist movement with certain reservations. It is difficult enough to define expressionism; one can, however, consider what distinguishes the work of Permeke from that of Kokoschka, Soutine or Kirchner. These last, to whom the expressionist label primarily belongs, are introspective painters, concerned with the expression of their innermost self. A painting of theirs is a personal confession. The human beings around them hardly excite their interest, much less their compassionate observation. Their universe is bounded by themselves. Permeke, on the other hand, lived in the world and was involved with it. At times he was struck by the beauty of a landscape or the grace of the human body, but he was also deeply moved by human misery and the brutal violence of natural forces. The feelings aroused in him by nature found an outlet in the exaggeration of whatever elements could best represent and express his emotion. The distortions to be found in his work cannot be explained solely by the artist's personality. They are the result of the clash between Permeke's feelings and reality, producing at times an uninhibited and lyrical art.

Neither the Cubist movement nor the other stylistic experiments of the French school interested Permeke. He was too spontaneous an artist to be occupied with the structural problems in painting. Principles of form and composition, in his eyes, were not valuable in themselves. Painting and drawing were only means subordinated to the lyrical message which he wished to convey in his pictures.

This explains an apparent ambiguity in his work. All his life, in addition to works in which he has employed the greatest distortion he has produced others distinguished by a classic monumentality. These variations in treatment are imposed on him by his subject matter. A peasant aroused his compassion and respect, and he distorted the hands which had scraped the soil to make them more expressive. But the female form evoked his refined sensibility and his drawing then became classic and timeless. He is always saved by the grandeur of his vision, which is free from all pettiness and trivial detail, and concentrates on the essential and the powerful.

Permeke's lack of interest in plastic problems is evident in the liberties he took with technique. For him there were no hard and fast distinctions between painting and drawing nor between drawing and sculpture. Just as detail must be sacrificed

to expression, technical means were of no importance. Only the result was important. It was not a question of confusing techniques or media, but of mixing them deliberately. It was not lack of discipline only but above all a matter of the adaptation of various techniques to serve a personal vision, as if the artist had felt the need to create his own language.

Permeke's life-work is a coherent whole and even the 'tamer' works of his last period are linked with others that went before. Some of the drawings of 1919 epitomize the world of Permeke. They recall, not in style but in spirit, Bruegel's drawings from life, for all Permeke's work derives from the same vision. A landscape for him was more than an assemblage of colours and shapes, it was an expression of life in all its power, sometimes in its brutal vitality, sometimes in its tragic sadness.

Art was no intellectual preoccupation for Permeke, nor an inner monologue, but a way of feeling and expressing life.

J. VAN LERBERGHE

Catalogue

Measurements are in inches and, in brackets, in centimetres

PAINTINGS: all the paintings are in oil on canvas unless otherwise stated

1 Maternity, 1913 *29⅛ × 21⅝ (74 × 55)* Lent by the BOYMANS MUSEUM, Rotterdam

2 The Stranger, 1916 *70⅛ × 67⅜ (178 × 171)* Lent by the MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE, Brussels *Plate 1*

3 Devonshire Landscape, 1916 *Gouache, 29⅞ × 25¼ (76 × 64)* Lent by M. MAX JANLET, Brussels

4 Harvest in Devonshire, 1917 *48⅜ × 69¼ (123 × 176)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

5 Woman with a Basket, 1919 *48⅞ × 39⅜ (124 × 100)* Lent by the MUSÉE ROYAL DES BEAUX-ARTS, Antwerp *Plate 2*

6 The Sermon, 1919 *Gouache, 33⅛ × 24¾ (84 × 63)* Lent by THE BARONESS LAMBERT, Brussels

7 The Dock at Ostende: Moonlight, 1920 *36¼ × 26⅝ (92 × 67)* Lent by M. MAX JANLET, Brussels

8 Kermesse, 1921 *29⅛ × 43¼ (74 × 105)* Lent by the MUSÉE ROYAL DES BEAUX-ARTS, Antwerp

9 'Over Permeke', 1922 *59 × 76¾ (150 × 195)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

10 Fisherman and his Wife, 1922 *50¾ × 68⅞ (129 × 175)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

11 The Betrothed, 1923 *50 × 59 (127 × 150)* Lent by the MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE, Brussels *Plate 4*

12 The Creek, 1923 *43¼ × 37⅜ (110 × 95)* Lent by M. MAX JANLET, Brussels

13 Small Seascape, 1923 *19¼ × 19¼ (49 × 49)* Lent by M. MAX JANLET, Brussels

14 The Big Dune, 1923 *30¼ × 24¾ (77 × 63)* Lent by M. MAX JANLET, Brussels

15 Black Bread, 1923 *50 × 59 (127 × 150)* Lent by M. G. VANDERHAEGEN, Mont-Saint-Amand (Ghent) *Plate 3*

16 The Wave, 1924 *51⅛ × 59 (130 × 150)* Lent by the MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE, Brussels

17 The Stable, 1924 *50⅜ × 60¼ (128 × 153)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

18 Farmyard, 1925 *35⅜ × 59 (90 × 150)* Lent by M. EMILE BONNIVERT, Antwerp

19 The Afternoon Meal, 1927 *50⅜ × 58⅝ (128 × 149)* Lent by the MUSÉE ROYAL DES BEAUX-ARTS, Antwerp

20 Pale Seascape, 1927 *39⅜ × 51⅛ (100 × 130)* Lent by M. ROBERT DESPRECHINS, St.-Denis-Westrem

21 Family with a Cat, 1928 *64⅛ × 70⅛ (163 × 178)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels *Plate 7*

22 The Caravan, 1928 *53⅛ × 43¼ (135 × 110)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels *Plate 8*

23 The Sow, 1928 *39⅜ × 47¼ (100 × 120)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels *Plate 10*

24 Dark Seascape, 1928 *51⅛ × 59 (130 × 150)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

25 Leonie, 1929 *70⅞ × 35⅜ (180 × 90)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels

26 Harvester, 1930 *57⅛ × 68⅞ (145 × 175)* Lent by M. MARCEL MABILLE, Brussels

27 Nursling, 1931 *35⅜ × 74¾ (90 × 190)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

28 Couple, 1932 *70⅞ × 68⅞ (180 × 175)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels *Plate 6*

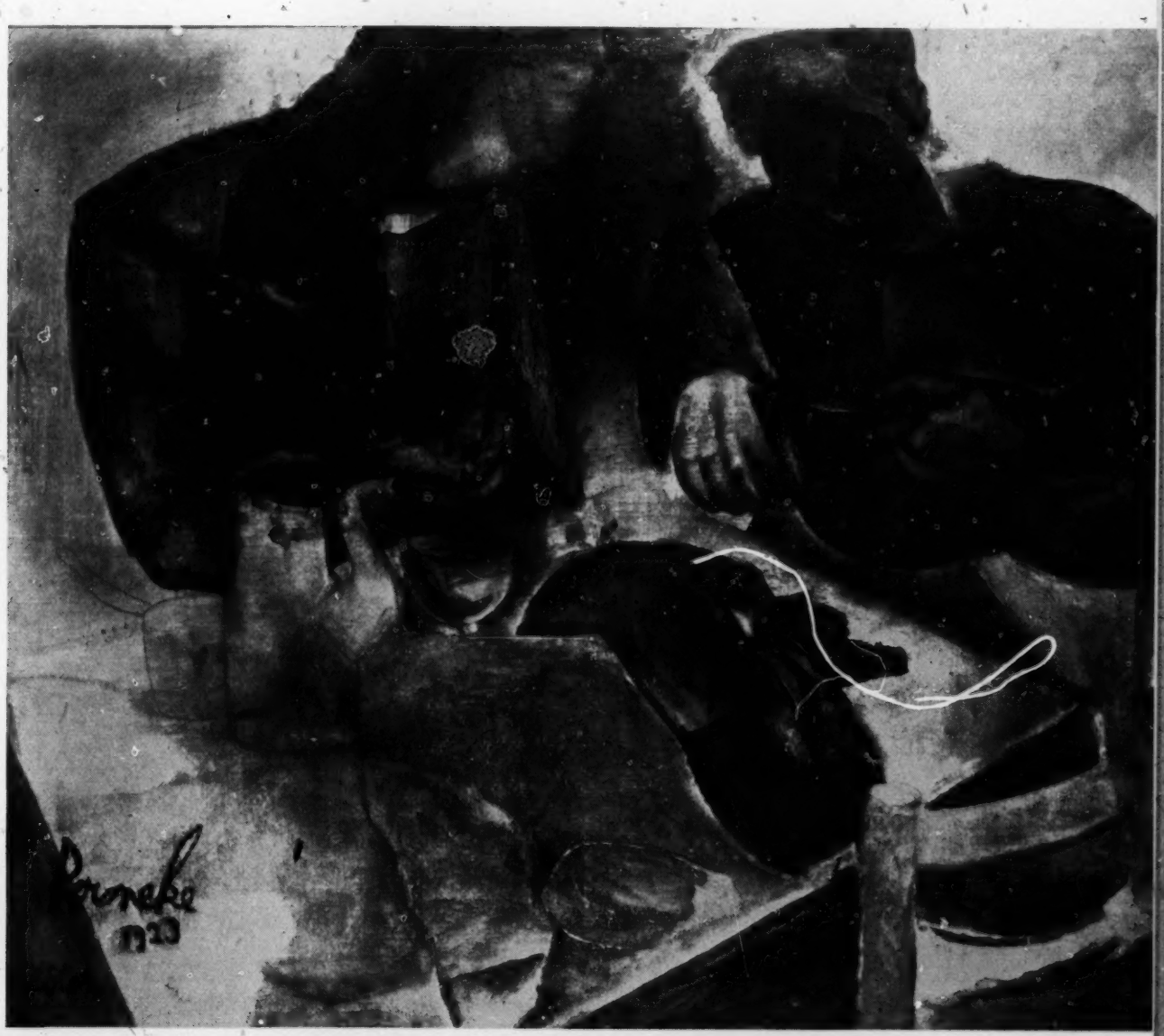
29 The Sower, 1933 *78¾ × 47¼ (200 × 120)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

30 Harvest, 1934 *51⅛ × 59 (130 × 150)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels

Plate 1 The Stranger, 1916 (2)

Plate 2 Woman with a Basket, 1919 (5)

Plate 3 Black Bread, 1923 (15)



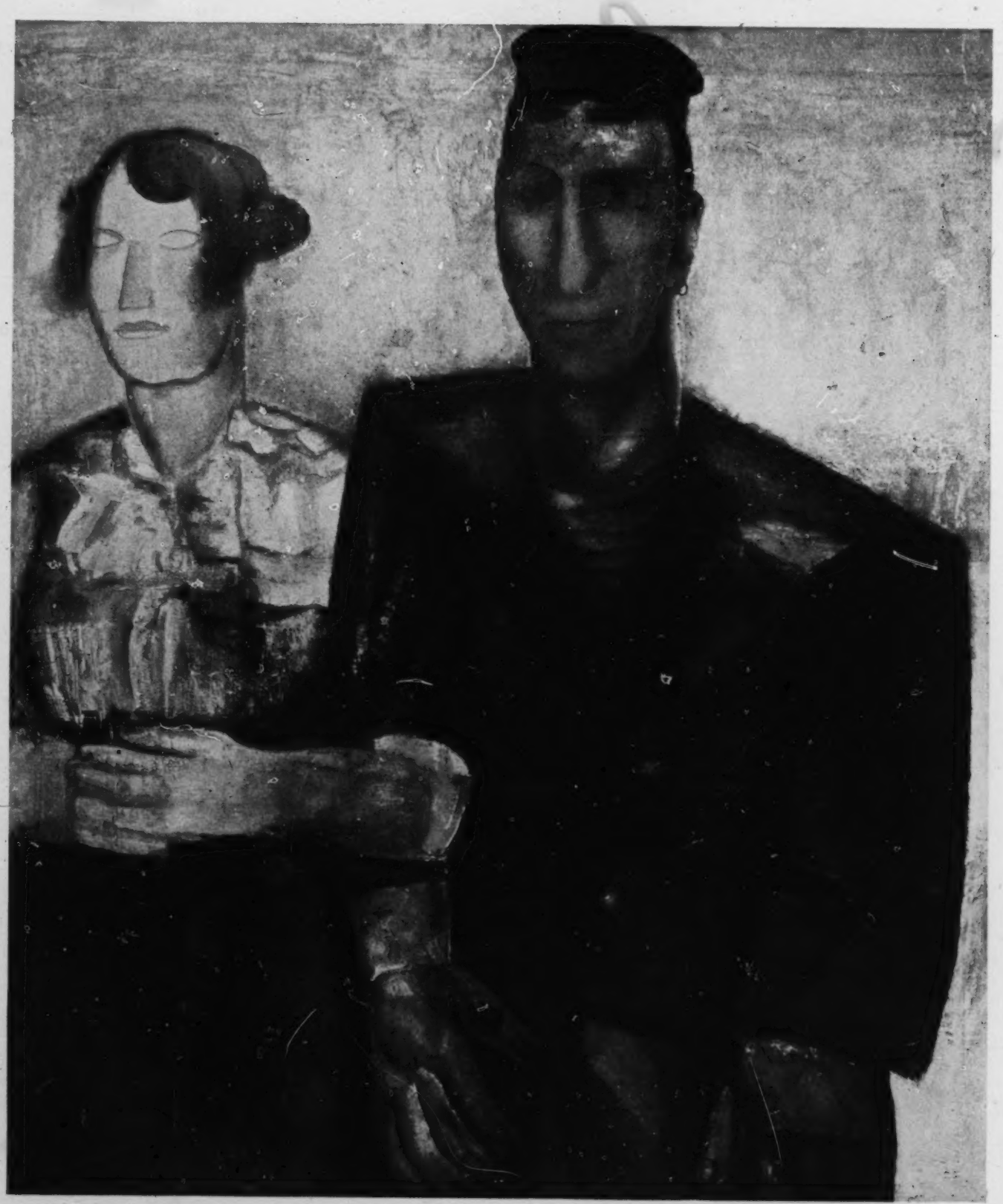


Plate 4 The Betrothed, 1923 (11)

Plate 5 The Shrimp Seller, 1921 (59)

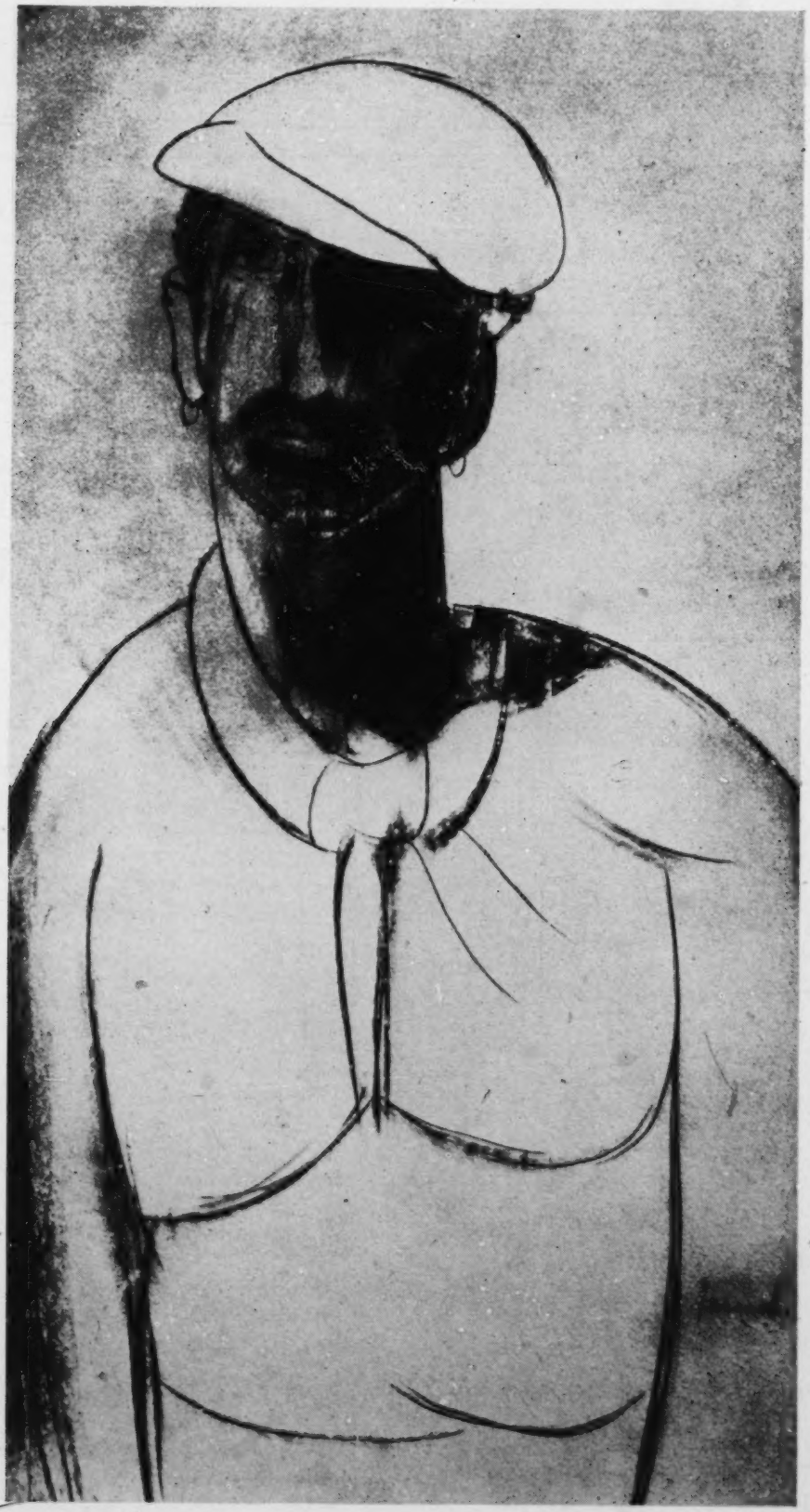


Plate 6 The Couple, 1932 (28)

Plate 7 The Family with a Cat, 1928 (21)

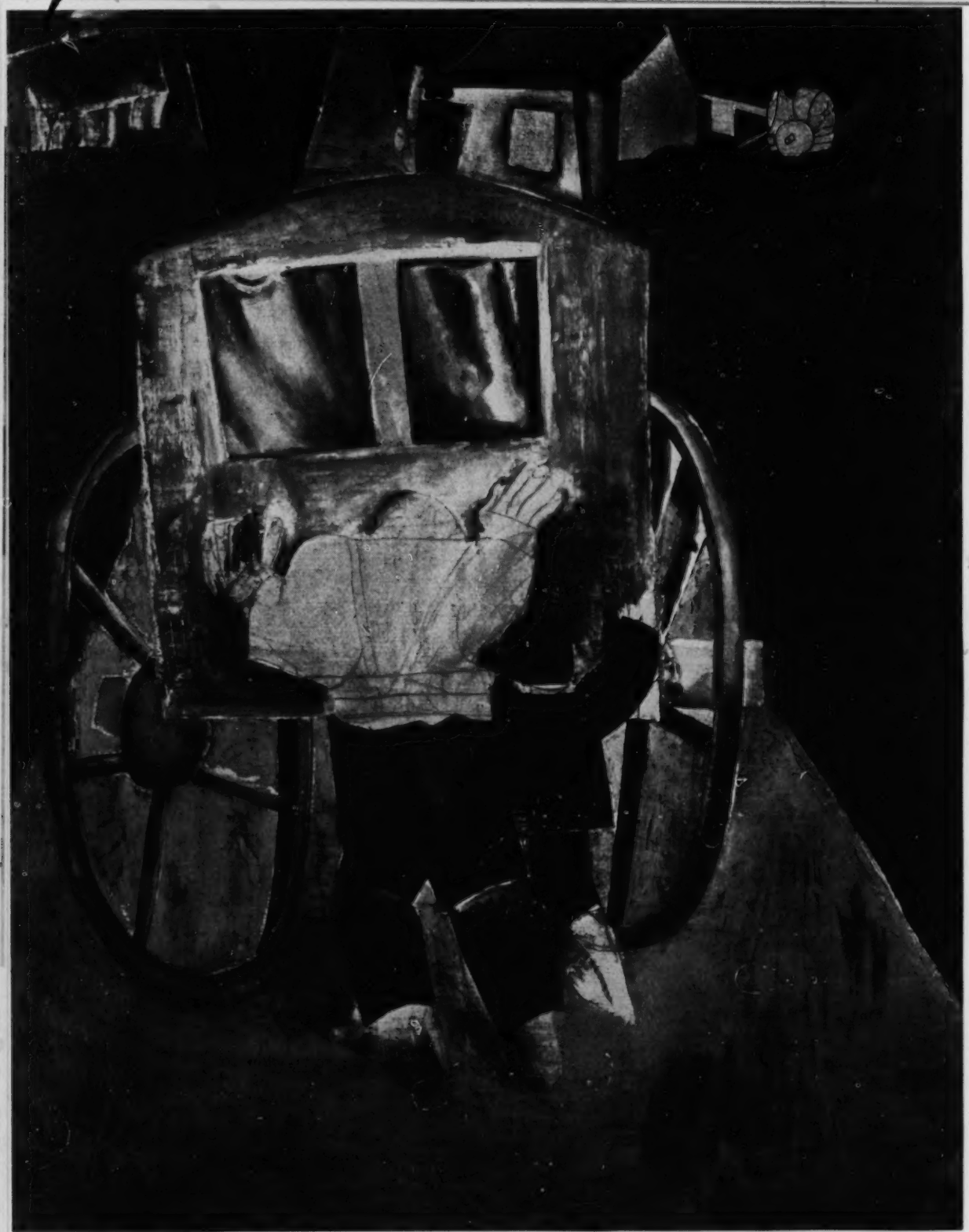


Plate 8 The Caravan, 1928 (22)

Plate 9 The Two Sisters, 1934 (72)

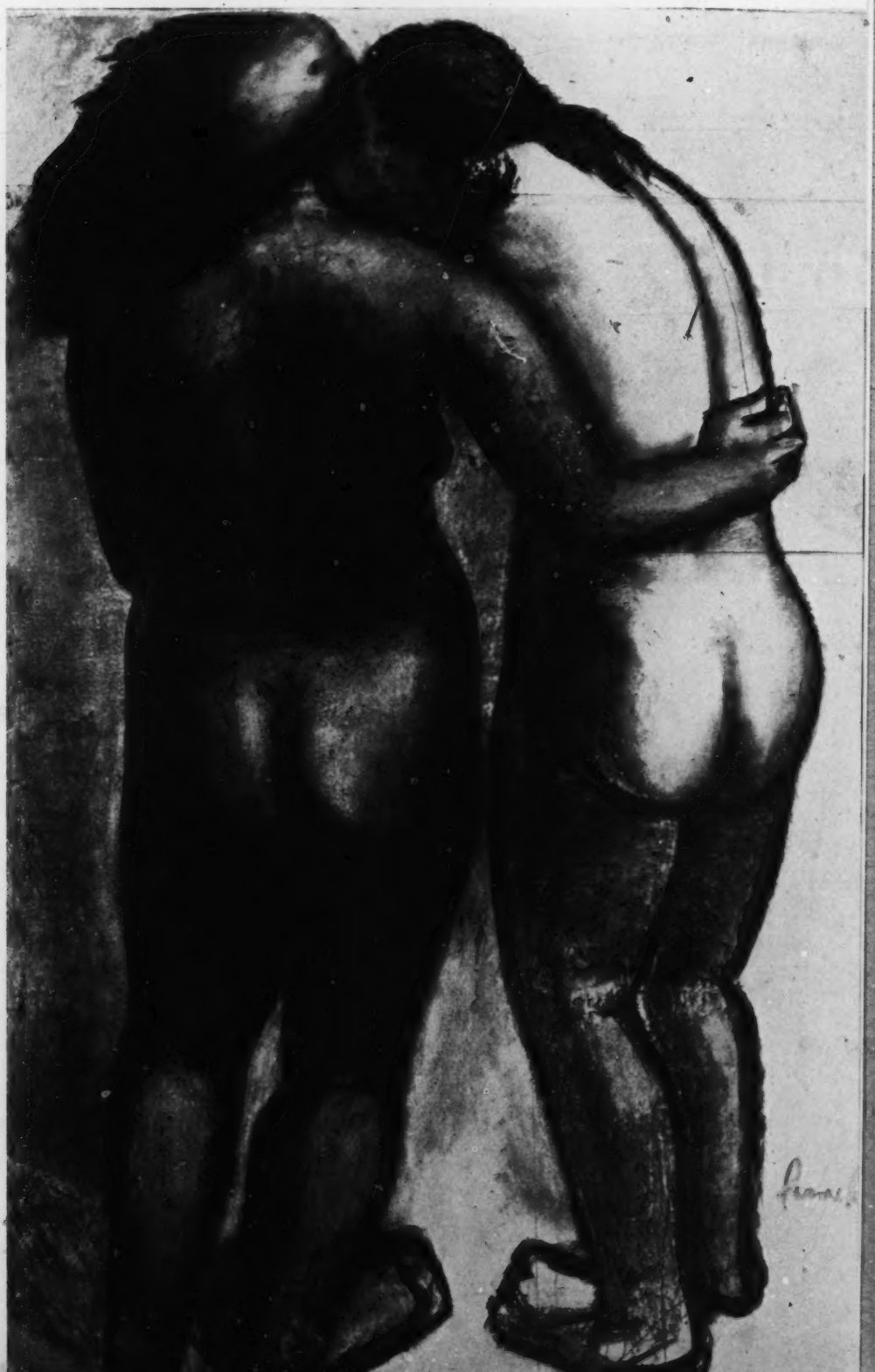


Plate 10 The Sow, 1928 (23)

Plate 11 Landscape in Brittany, 1951 (47)

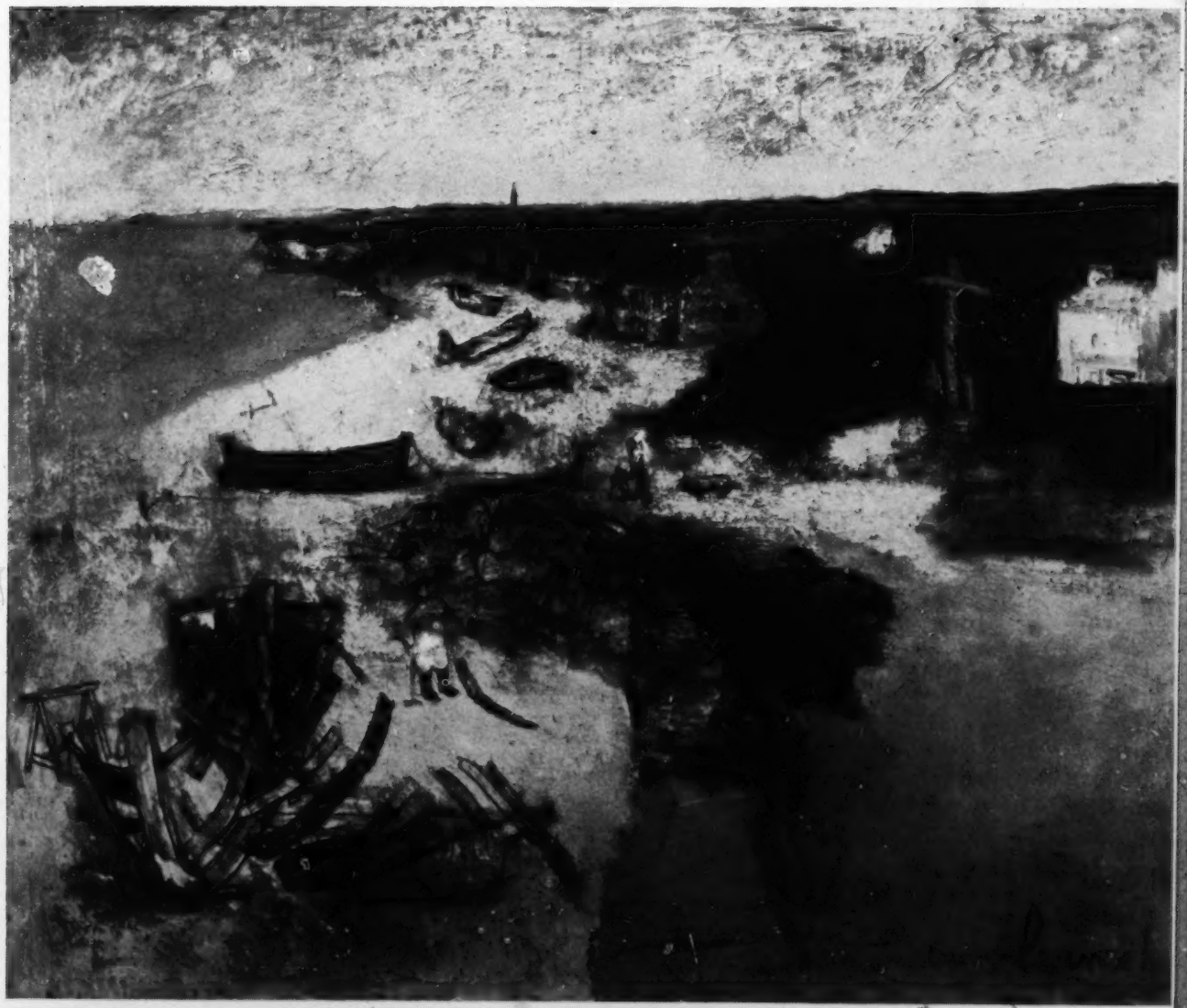


Plate 12 The Daily Bread, 1951 (48)

31 Nude against a Red Background, 1934 *35⅜ × 70⅞ (90 × 180)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels

32 Green Seascape, 1934 *48⅜ × 68⅛ (123 × 173)* Lent by the MUSÉE ROYAL DES BEAUX-ARTS, Antwerp

33 The Blessed, 1935 *65 × 70⅞ (165 × 180)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

34 Man eating Potatoes, 1935 *43¾ × 53½ (111 × 136)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

35 Christ, 1935 *43¾ × 26 (110 × 66)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

36 Maternity, 1936 *Panel, 59 × 48⅞ (150 × 124)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

37 October, 1937 *57⅛ × 68⅞ (145 × 175)* Lent by the MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE, Brussels

38 Spring, 1937 *51⅛ × 59 (130 × 150)* Lent by the MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE, Brussels

39 Dawn, 1942–3 *65 × 70⅞ (165 × 180)* Lent by M. FRANCIS FRANCK, Antwerp

40 The Big Cloud, 1942–3 *39⅜ × 51⅛ (100 × 130)* Lent by M. FRANCIS FRANCK, Antwerp

41 Golden Landscape, 1945 *59 × 68⅞ (150 × 175)* Lent by the MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE, Brussels

42 Landscape with Haystacks, 1947 *19⅝ × 29½ (50 × 75)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

43 Harvest, 1948 *27⅝ × 39⅜ (70 × 100)* Lent by M. A. TAEVERNIER, Ghent

44 Winter Landscape, 1950 *39⅜ × 59 (100 × 150)* Lent by M. A. TAEVERNIER, Ghent

45 Woman with a Pink Scarf, 1950 *29½ × 23⅝ (75 × 60)* Lent by M. A. TAEVERNIER, Ghent

46 Woman with Yellow Gloves, 1950 *39⅜ × 27⅝ (100 × 70)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

47 Landscape in Brittany, 1951 *57⅛ × 68⅞ (145 × 175)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke *Plate 11*

48 The Daily Bread, 1951 *68⅞ × 59 (175 × 150)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke *Plate 12*

49 Breton Fishermen, 1951 *15¾ × 17¾ (40·5 × 45)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

50 Fishermen's House, 1951 *15¾ × 23⅝ (40 × 60)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

Undated paintings

51 Harvest *42⅛ × 30¼ (107 × 77)* Lent by M. E. VERANNEMAN, Kruishoutem

52 Fried Fish *52¾ × 60¼ (134 × 153)* Lent by THE BARON OPSOMER, Antwerp

DRAWINGS

53 Portrait of the Artist's Mother, 1913 *29½ × 46⅛ (75 × 117)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

54 The Procession, 1919 *Wash drawing on silk, 18⅞ × 20½ (48 × 52)* Lent by THE BARON OPSOMER, Antwerp

55 Fish Market, 1919 Lent by MME D. M. VAN BUUREN, Brussels

56 Beggars, 1919 Lent by MME D. M. VAN BUUREN, Brussels

57 The Circus, 1921 *24 × 28⅜ (61 × 72)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

58 Woman with a Basket, 1921 *36 × 39⅜ (160 × 100)* Lent by M. FRANCIS FRANCK, Antwerp

59 The Shrimp Seller, 1921 *29⅛ × 16⅛ (74 × 41)* Lent by M. JEAN GRIMAR, Brussels *Plate 5*

60 The Sailor, 1921 *59½ × 39⅜ (151 × 100)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

61 Nude bending over, 1924 *59⅞ × 39⅜ (152 × 100)* Lent by M. JEAN GRIMAR, Brussels

62 Peasant Woman drinking, 1924 *11¾ × 9½ (30 × 24)* Lent by M. HUGO VAN DEN ABEELE, Deurle

63 The Sailor, 1924 *25¼ × 18½ (64 × 47)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

64 Seated Nude, 1926 *59 × 39⅜ (150 × 100)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels

65 Nude (full-face, with head bent), 1926 *57⅞ × 39⅜ (147 × 100)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

66 Nude, 1926 *57⅛ × 37 (145 × 94)* Lent by M. MARCEL STAL, Brussels

67 Peasant and Peasant Woman, 1928 *64⅝ × 50 (164 × 127)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels

68 The Cart, 1929 *13 × 19⅝ (33 × 50)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

69 Maternity, 1929 *70⅞ × 35⅜ (180 × 90)* Lent by the MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS, Ostende.

70 Man with a Spade, 1930 *39⅜ × 47¼ (100 × 120)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

71 Nude (back view), 1932 *25⅝ × 19⅝ (65 × 50)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

72 The Two Sisters, 1934 *70⅞ × 47¼ (180 × 120)* Lent by M. LOUIS BOGAERTS, Brussels *Plate 9*

73 Paula, 1935 *60⅝ × 40⅛ (154 × 102)* Lent by M. G. R. GASPERINI, Carracas

74 Peasant Life, 1939 *31½ × 48 (80 × 122)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

75 Reclining Nude, 1941 *48 × 78¾ (122 × 200)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

76 Temptation of St. Antony, 1943 *35⅜ × 46⅛ (90 × 117)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

77 Nude (back view), 1944 *Charcoal, 28⅜ × 61 (72 × 155)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

78 Puberty, 1947 *29½ × 47¼ (75 × 120)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

79 Standing Nude, 1948 *57⅛ × 48⅜ (145 × 123)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

80 Seated Nude, 1948 *59 × 43¼ (150 × 110)* Lent by the MUSÉE PERMEKE, Jabbeke

Undated drawings

81 Toone *30¼ × 22½ (77 × 57)* Lent by M. K. J. GEIRLANDT, Ghent

82 Standing Nude (front view) *Charcoal, 18⅞ × 11⅜ (48 × 29)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

83 Nude against a Brown Background *Lithographic chalk, 18⅞ × 12⅛ (48 × 31)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

84 Pieta *35 × 60¼ (89 × 153)* Lent by M. GUSTAVE VAN GELUWE, Brussels

85 Standing Nude *70⅞ × 35⅜ (180 × 90)* Lent by M. J. DE MAEYER, Antwerp

Lenders

Antwerp, MUSÉE ROYAL DES BEAUX-ARTS 5, 8, 19, 32

BOGAERTS, Louis 23, 25, 28, 30, 31, 64, 67, 72

BONNIVERT, Emile 18

Brussels, MUSÉES ROYAUX DES BEAUX-ARTS DE BELGIQUE 2, 11, 16, 37, 38, 41

DE MAEYER, J. 85

DESPRECHINS, Robert 20

FRANCK, Francis 39, 40, 58

GASPERINI, G. P. 73

GEIRLANDT, K. J. 81

GRIMAR, Jean 59, 61

Jabbeke, MUSÉE PERMEKE 9, 24, 27, 29, 33, 35, 36, 42, 46–50, 53, 68, 70, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80

JANLET, Max 3, 7, 12, 13, 14

LAMBERT, The Baroness 6

MABILLE, Marcel 26

OPSOMER, The Baron 52, 54

Ostende, MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS 69

Rotterdam, BOYMANS MUSEUM 1

STAL, Marcel 66

TAEVERNIER, A. 43–45

VAN BUUREN, Mme D. M. 55, 56

VAN DEN ABEELE, Hugo 62

VANDERHAEGEN, G. 15

VAN GELUWE, Gustave 4, 10, 17, 21, 22, 34, 57, 60, 63, 65, 71, 74, 75, 82, 83, 84

VERANNEMAN, E. 51

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